

FEATURES

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The anti-smoking crusaders

Two doctors from two countries present two very different visions on how to fight the smoking epidemic. They spoke with Medical Post correspondent Mark Cardwell

The Canadian battle

Winnipeg's Dr. Mark Taylor, president of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada (PSFC), chuckles as he recounts a 1993 incident that ended his 16-year military career and launched him into the vanguard of Canada's antismoking movement. But he certainly wasn't laughing then.

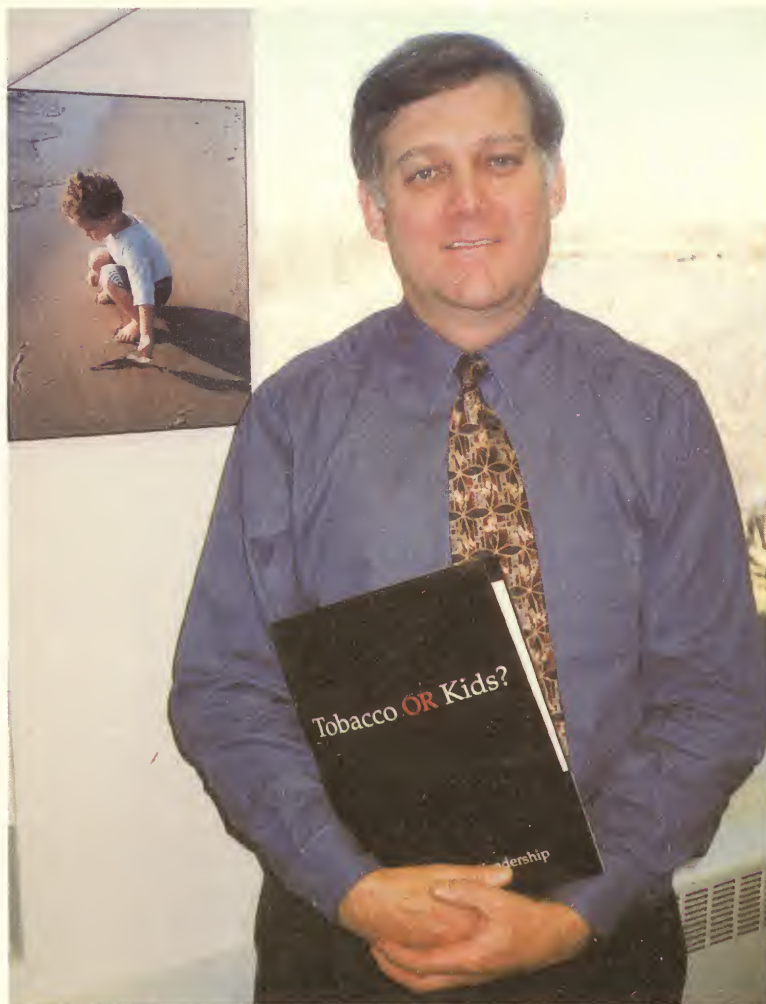
The incident has its origins back in the late 1970s. As a young medical student at the University of Toronto in the Canadian Forces' medical officer training program, he was struck by the findings of a major federal health report which clearly identified smoking as the number one preventable cause of death and disease in the country.

"It really opened my eyes as to the god-awful extent to which tobacco was a public health hazard," said Dr. Taylor, now deputy head of surgery at St. Boniface General Hospital, one of two teaching hospitals at the University of Manitoba. "And from what I could tell, the medical profession wasn't doing much about the problem."

Dr. Taylor took his first steps as an antitobacco activist in 1984 when, as base surgeon at New Brunswick's CFB Chatham, he petitioned for the removal of cigarette machines from the base hospital. Despite heated complaints from the base commander, the machines were removed, earning the young surgeon a reputation within the tightly knit military community as, in his own words, "a troublemaker at least, a lunatic at worst."

That reputation certainly wasn't enhanced when he joined the PSFC in 1988 and quickly became the group's Atlantic representative. He also became a familiar face at antismoking conferences, making many like-minded friends and contacts in the process.

Although he had long been aware of the prevalence of smoking in the military, Dr. Taylor was shocked by the heavy tobacco use



Dr. Mark Taylor, president of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, left a military career for a crusade against the tobacco industry.

he witnessed among Canadian sailors in the Persian Gulf. He served a six-month posting there as fleet surgeon with Canada's military contingent beginning in August 1990.

"It was appalling," said Dr. Taylor, who blamed the problem primarily on easy access to cigarettes, which were being sold duty-free at only a dollar a pack.

Soon after his return to Halifax, Dr. Taylor helped one of the navy's top surgeons, Captain Dr. Larry Myette, design and carry out a command-approved survey of tobacco use among sailors at navy headquarters in Halifax. The survey revealed a whopping 60% of young sailors smoke—twice the rate of the general population. However, the vast majority of navy personnel also indicated they were in favour of smoke-free ships.

Capt. Myette sent both the report and a list of recommendations up the chain of command. Over the next six months, Dr. Taylor hounded his superiors for

news on if or when the report would be made public. Afraid the navy would never act, he decided to light a fire under the navy brass by sending a copy of the unclassified report to a medical editor.

That move—the "incident"—created a media frenzy in Halifax for weeks in early 1993. While a threat of court martial for having spoken out on a public issue without permission proved empty ("the military would have looked pretty foolish court-martialing a doctor who wanted to warn people about the hazards of smoking," said Dr. Taylor), the poisoned work atmosphere that resulted convinced him he had no future in the military.

Ironically, his resignation came into force in June, the same month the Toronto-based Non-Smokers Rights Association named him "Non-Smoker of the Year." And less than a year later, the navy adopted one of the most stringent military antismoking policies in the world—a policy that included several measures to

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The American angle

Dr. Alan Blum is a giant in anti-smoking circles the world over. For the past 25 years, he has devoted his life to studying—and fighting—the tobacco industry like it was a parasitic disease.

So you'd think he'd be saddened by the moroseness that has characterized the American anti-tobacco movement since last June, when the U.S. Congress killed the colossal \$516 billion (US) antitobacco bill that would have raised tobacco taxes by \$1.10 a pack, settled dozens of state lawsuits, and given Washington sweeping powers to regulate cigarette makers.

But Dr. Blum is anything but sad. In fact, the bill's demise—and the anti-smoking lobby's subsequent inability to rally its forces—has left him feeling downright chipper.

"The bubble has burst, the bear market has arrived for this anti-smoking movement," said Dr. Blum, a 50-year-old family physician in Houston and the co-founder and chairman of Doctors Ought to Care, or DOC, a non-profit grassroots anti-smoking movement of American health professionals.

The defunct bill "is a dead issue now, and the movement will never get that close again. In many ways, I'm relieved. And I feel vindicated, too."

Dr. Blum's reaction will come as no surprise to those familiar

with the American anti-smoking scene. A sharp-tongued iconoclast and self-described anti-tobacco "purist," he has been an outspoken, sometimes virulent critic of both the process and the people that have driven the anti-smoking effort in the U.S. since 1994, when purloined documents showed that tobacco companies have marketed to children, manipulated nicotine levels, and lied about it for decades.

The public outrage that followed those revelations created a ripe environment for a crack-down against tobacco in the U.S. As the number of lawsuits and criminal investigations snowballed, so too did the interest and involvement of journalists, lawyers, politicians and special interest lobby groups.

As one of a handful of American doctors who had been fighting the tobacco industry and its allies for years in relative obscurity, Dr. Blum initially welcomed the public's sudden fixation with the war on tobacco.

That attention was a far cry from the 1950s and '60s when tobacco was king—and a small-town physician in upstate New York named Leon Blum encouraged his son to record, for posterity, the cigarette ad jingles that inundated radio and television programs at the time.

"My father predicted society would one day look back on an

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Dr. Alan Blum with former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop.

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